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EDITOR'S NOTE

Interviewed by JHE Paine, May 2003, First published in present issue

1 Tobias Wolff has steadily earned distinction over the last two decades and more as the author of carefully crafted and highly nuanced short fiction whose lineage, as he indicates here, can be traced back through the work of Raymond Carver, Katherine Anne Porter, and Ernest Hemingway to the fiction of Anton Chekhov (His introduction to a collection of Chekhov stories [*A Doctor's Visit*, 1988] contains some of the most perceptive commentary available on Chekhov as a writer of short stories). He is also an insightful reader of the other "kind" of story (those of Tolstoy and Flannery O'Connor, for example) and an alert observer of contemporary fiction.

2 Among Wolff's work are three collections of short stories, *In the Garden of North American Martyrs* (1981), *Back in the World* (1986), and *The Night in Question* (1996). His novella *The Barracks Thief* (1984) won the 1985 PEN/Faulkner Award. He has also written two highly regarded memoirs, *This Boy's Life* (1989) and *In Pharaoh's Army* (1993). Since 1997, Wolff has taught English at Stanford University and has continued to publish short stories, mostly in *The New Yorker*. He received the American Academy of Arts and Letters Award in Literature in 2001. His novel *Old School* appeared in late 2003. Tobias Wolff's fiction, though widely recognized as among the best being written in the United States today, has received relatively little critical attention. More complete examination of his work is overdue.

3 Our interview took place in late May 2003 in Rome, where he was concluding a year-long sabbatical leave. The Wolff stories referred to here all are included in *The Night in Question* .

JP: Your characters, many of them, seem to share a longing, a yearning for a lost wholeness that was perhaps never there, but *should* have been there. Could you respond?

TW: A friend of mine and I were once in a conversation with young writers, and one of them asked him what he thought good fiction is, and he said, "well, the beginning of it is that someone wants something". We all want something. Most of us live with the sense that we have not completed ourselves. There is work always to be done, some final part of ourselves to be filled in, that we think of as being our true destiny.

JP: I guess I was thinking of that sort of Romantic sense of a lost world, either Wordsworthian longing, or as I was thinking yesterday as I visited the Keats-Shelley House, the nightingale ode, losing that dream, that vision, losing that song and coming back to your self, that sense of loss.

TW: It certainly is our human lot to feel that way. It may be there is something in particular about Americans feeling that, because of the extravant expectations that so many of us began with, the sense of limitless possibility. At the end of *Gatsby*, Fitzgerald writes of the "fresh green breast of the new world as it once appeared to Dutch sailors' eyes"--and the sense of the diminishment of that promise. Americans feel that about their country, and to a certain extent about themselves. As you grow up, you begin to recognize that there are compromises inherent in being alive in this world, the things you give up, the little pieces of yourself you have to give up to get by. It's a humanizing process, this necessary negotiation with the world. But it also engenders a longing in us for the pristine state we imagine we once lived in. Actually, it's just that we really hadn't begun the trip yet.

And innocence is not always necessarily a virtue either. I think of Graham Green's novels, where the innocents are always the ones who do the most damage.

JP: Pascal's *Pensée*, "the heart has its reasons that reason knows not of" seems appropriate to many of your characters, not only to Wiley in "The Life of the Body". Would you say that it applies to them?

TW: One of the things I notice more and more in others, and I am sure that it is true of myself too, is how little we seem to understand our own motivations. This has always been a ripe subject for fiction and especially for satire. We act out of promptings that we hardly know we are receiving. And to the extent that we can apprehend why we do what we do, we try to dignify it by some kind of ethical system, or perhaps by saying in our most honest moments that the heart has its reasons that reason does not understand.

That distance between the supposition of why you are doing what you are doing and the shadowy reality of it is the loam of fiction. That terrain, that's exactly where fiction writers work. You wouldn't be interested in writing about somebody who actually understood why he did what he did and acted completely logically. That's why a writer like, say, Ayn Rand, doesn't hold on to us after we reach maturity. Her characters, especially her heroes, act logically and in concert with their ideas of why they are acting, and there is something in us, as we get older, that knows this is not humanly possible. And we get more interested in that more confusing, ambiguous ground that all of us occupy.

JP: Question of influence: "Hemingway, first and last", you have said.

TW: Well, one should never say "first and last," because last isn't here yet. But I love Hemingway, love him and of course resent him as well. And get angry with him. But

when I talk about his influence I'm not talking simply about admiration. I'm talking about the effects he's had on us as writers that we may not even be aware of. When you walk into a room the furniture is set up in a certain way that forces you to sit in a certain configuration. Well, he's one of the guys who changed all the furniture around in the room before we got there. In that sense he's more influential for most writers than, say, Joyce, who didn't change the language of writing the way Hemingway did.

I have a new novel coming out in November. Hemingway plays a part in it. Writing it sent me back to his work, and I learned all over again how beautiful a story writer he was, and how tender, and how, if I may say so, almost feminine in their understandings and their tenderness so many of those stories are. And they're not as the common image would have them, not hairy-chested, rather the opposite. Almost all of them are about vulnerability and being wounded and incomplete, hurt. I could go on all day about this. You rarely find the tough tone that he's parodied for. "Big Two Hearted River" presents a man on the verge of completely falling apart. For Nick, fishing isn't a macho activity. It's a rite, a set of orderly steps by which he pulls himself together. The fragility of the mind that haunts that story is unmistakable, and I think that's the extraordinary effect of Hemingway's best work -- the fragility of our being, how easily we break. He captures that in a language that is fresh and true.

I was first attracted to him as a boy because he seemed to me to exemplify a masculine self-sufficiency, and I imposed that on what I was reading without actually getting at the truth of what I was reading. He made it possible for people to do that, especially in his later work, as we all know, by his inadvertent self-parody and posing. But his real greatness has outlived all that.

JP: I have been reminded again and again, in reading your stories and interviews, of Henry James's "The Art of Fiction," though one rarely makes this connection in speaking of your work. James's admonition that "catching the very note and trick, the strange irregular rhythm of life, that is the attempt whose strenuous force keeps Fiction upon her feet" seems to apply aptly to your stories.

TW: Well, that would be nice if it did. I can hardly improve on that. How do you persuade a reader to enter your world and to believe in it, and assent to it? I am not a writer who wants to remind his readers that after all this is just a story and that the characters are just letters on a page, or to rebuke the reader for having the naiveté to believe in the world I am creating. I want to bring the reader into the world I have made and I want him to believe in it, and in order to do that you have to do exactly what James is talking about. You have to somehow make the reader feel, even as the reader is disarmed and unsettled, that at the deepest level there is something familiar here. He's saying that we share, however different we are, a recognition of how things happen.

Eliot said that James had a mind "too fine to be violated by an idea." What he meant was that James was free of any palpable design on us. Which isn't to say that he did not mean to put us to the test, as Isabel Archer is put to the test. *The Portrait of a Lady* is about the strange paradox that for free will to mean anything, we have to honor the choices we make once we have made them. Otherwise we are reduced to creatures of whim and not free at all, just pulled by desire. Isabel's decision to stay with Osmond is outrageous to us because it seems to be a choice to be a victim. But for that great freedom that she had been given at the beginning to really have depth, for that freedom to be acted out in the world, the choice that the freedom gave her has to be

honored. It's an extraordinary paradox, and a profound one, yet you never feel it as an insistent thing, you never feel it as a program, as an idea by itself, outside the web of relationships in the novel and the way the novel moves in the recognizable yet strange reality of the story as it unfolds.

James has caught more than one writer in his web. Cynthia Ozick, of course, has wonderful things to say about James and about his influence on her. And she had to struggle in some ways to strike out on her own, as we all do. We all have some father or mother that we have to get out of the clutches of in order to become the writer that we are going to be.

JP: Referring to Chekhov, you have written that "if he could not write at length, he would write at depth, making every detail suggest others, capturing a moment of someone's life in such a way that we intuitively trace that life beyond the story, drawing the circle from the arc." This brings to mind for me another passage from James, in which he relates the anecdote of the English novelist who, having glimpsed through a doorway in Paris a household of young Protestants at table, is able from this "direct personal impression" to produce the "reality" of her story. It is that sort of negative capability, "the power to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implications of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern," as James has it, that you seem to deploy in creating your fictions, and you seem to demand the same sort of active-receptive power on the part of your readers.

TW: One of the things that I am at home with in Chekhov is the degree to which he trusts his reader to travel beyond the given, to collaborate with him in the making of his stories, and this is most evident of course in his endings. Chekhov was doing something very different from what, say, Tolstoy was doing. Tolstoy wrote a short story like a novel, and there was a sense of finality to his conclusions.

Writers still operate, to speak roughly, from those two kinds of impulses in writing stories. Flannery O'Connor had a Tolstoyan sense of how to write a story. You've got Mrs. May in "Greenfield" with that bull goring her at the end, it's like a pietá, we're supposed to see it that way. All her stories have that finality about them -- Mrs. Turpin looking up into the sky in "Revelation," coming to a realization that her virtues are not the most important thing about her, and that even those will be burnt away, and the very people whom she has despised will be leading the parade into heaven, and they'll be out of step and messing up the parade, and that's the way it is. There is a wonderful conclusiveness to that ending, which you would never find in a Chekhov story, where the sense of the characters, their relationship to what is happening, is very tentative and ambiguous. However, you can feel within the whole tenor of the story, rather than something that happens in the way of an insight or a decisive event right at the end, that something may indeed may have moved that character just a degree or two, but she will end up in a very different place at the end of her journey because of what's taken place.

Sometimes Chekhov's stories are content simply to catch a moment of human life that tells us something about ourselves. It can be a medical student drawing the skeleton of his mistress on her skin so he can study it for an exam. With the strange way he objectifies her, you can see right away that he's already moving on and she is going to be discarded. She is simply another of his objects of study, but the story never says that, it just shows it happening.

Chekhov was an intellectually vibrant man, full of ideas. These animate his stories, but they never become evident, as they will in a Tolstoy story or a Flannery O'Connor story.

She is a descendant of Tolstoy, whereas Katherine Anne Porter writes in the tradition of Chekhov. Porter's conclusions are much more tentative than Flannery O'Connor's. She could be taxed, I suppose, by the reader who doesn't like Chekhov with the same kind of refusal to make an ending of great finality. Sometimes her endings have great lyrical beauty, as in "Flowering Judas", but there is tremendous irony embedded in Laura's situations, and the insights that people have when they do have them in those stories aren't necessarily anything they can act on. Indeed, they can become a further problem to deal with, an unwelcome burden of knowledge.

JP: This brings me around to a question about "moral fiction." With what you've said just now about Tolstoy and O'Connor, one certainly sees you in the tradition of Chekhov and Katherine Anne Porter, but a lot of readers find Flannery O'Connor's moral certainty a considerable consolation. I gather you would affirm that the fiction you write is moral fiction, but it may strike some readers too close for comfort. Your stories don't have the kind of satisfying allegory that O'Connor is nearly always writing.

TB: Yes, but let me say too that I really love her work. When I first discovered her, it was a revelation to me that someone could do this sort of thing in fiction. I am not drawn to do it that way myself, but it is an extraordinary thing, and it does come from genuine conviction, and is always saved by that strange sense of humor of hers. There's even something a little funny about Mrs. May getting gored at the end of "Greenfield"--it shouldn't be funny, but it is, and she knows it. There is a spiritual mischievousness in her. It saves the fiction from becoming completely programmatic. Sometimes, though, I do feel her thumb on the scales.

JP: There's that utter conviction about her, there's no doubt. I mean, even in Pascal, "the heart has its reasons...", there's a fine sense of the ambiguity of the human condition. We don't know. Flannery O'Connor is missing that, and Tolstoy, as you have already said, is missing it as well.

TW: Her characters can doubt, but you always feel that there is something beyond doubt outside that is guiding them. There is a hand on them that is guiding them. I recall that verse of the Psalm, "Thou hast beset me behind and before, and laid thine hand upon me". Well, that's the situation with her characters. It's like Parker in "Parker's Back," he cannot get away, he tries to run away like Jonah on a ship, he flees, and yet he cannot escape the necessity of taking on this image that he finally ends up with, being scourged and crucified at the end by his own wife. Everything he does moves him closer and closer, and that is the situation of the characters, they are fleeing and yet they still approach, and there's always the sense of the reality that makes this happen, and about that she has no doubt at all. It is both a great strength and a weakness. I suppose it's always that way, isn't it, whatever is best about a writer is also what some readers will balk at.

JP: Lying, in your stories, can be redemptive or destructive. One lies because "the world is not enough," you have remarked. Then again, one of my students remarked that in "The Life of the Body" and elsewhere, we are reminded that the worst lies may be those we tell ourselves.

TW: Yes, that's pretty fair. It's something that for better or for worse seems to show up in my work again and again, this obsession with the various evolutions of misrepresentation and evasion that amounts to falsehood, that we are, I think, more or less continually engaged in. You can't live in this world with a completely truthful apprehension of it all. It's built into our very natures to filter, ameliorate, deny, edit. In the *Four Quartets*, Eliot says, "mankind cannot bear very much reality". That's true. So

what are the mechanisms by which we arrange to live in this world on terms comfortable to ourselves? That can amount to a kind of corruption, it can also amount to a kind of necessary accommodation.

Now that's the most fundamental thing I am talking about, and then others of us obviously indulge it to a degree that it becomes corruption. Storytelling is not really what I would call a lie. When the understanding is present between people that something is a story, then you are excused, you get a reprieve. But oddly enough, it's just at those times that we are allowed some of our most profound visions of the truth, just when we have all agreed that what's being said is not actually true, that's when at some level our guard goes down in a way that we can see things as they are. When we watch *KingLear*, we know we are watching a play, and that these people have cars outside and that during the break they are going to call somebody on the cell phone, all that sort of thing. We know it's a play written some four hundred years ago, we know Shakespeare cribbed it from another source and changed things, yet when we are watching this play, there are moments when the truth itself is in front of us.

JP: The material conditions of literature are changing. Hypertext, multimedia, and the increasing predominance of telecommunications may mean "the end of literature as we know it". For J. Hillis Miller, "The concept of literature in the West has been inextricably tied to Cartesian notions of selfhood, to the regime of print, to Western-style democracies and notions of the nation-state, and to the right of free speech within such democracies" [*Speech Acts in Literature*, 157]. Given this state of affairs, what would you see as the future of literature in the new century?

TW: I'm not a prophet, so I won't try to be, and I really don't know, but people's interest in literature doesn't seem to have flagged all that much. It's often pointed out that in the glory days there were 2000 slick commercial magazines that were publishing short stories on a regular basis. But if you go back and look at the stories that were in those journals, they really weren't very good, most of them. They were genre stories, written so that people would know what they were going to get when they picked it up, the way you know what kind of hamburger you are going to get when you go to McDonald's. There's a consolation in that, and there's nothing illegitimate about it, but the impulse and the kind of talent that went into that has simply moved over, first to radio and then to television. It was really just a kind of verbal television.

At any given time in our literary history only a few writers have been writing fiction of quality and something that would be likely to have legs, something we would want to read years and years later. At any given time, work of the first quality is at a premium. I have not seen any falling off, really. We always venerate the giants, but we don't know who the giants of this age will be. And they will no doubt give fevers of anxiety to another generation of young writers, as Hemingway, Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Flannery O'Connor and others have done to us.

The question of hypertext, though, I don't know where that's going. I think it will not have a displacing effect on what we have traditionally called literature. Literature will, I think, have a parallel existence with it. Robert Coover has been talking up hypertext for years now, indeed for about twenty years, and what's happened with it? It's grown in sophistication with the technology that allows people to become interactive in the devising of plots. But it hasn't in the remotest way affected the writing of serious literature, as far as I can tell.

Every ten years or so, John Barth goes back and revisits that early essay of his on “The Literature of Exhaustion”. In his most recent one, he talked about hypertext more or less in this way: “You know, if you want to have a dinner at your house and have all sorts of people come into the kitchen and throw something in the pot, that's fine, but when you come to my house, you don't come into my kitchen and put anything into my pot. I will cook, and I will serve you a good meal, but it's mine to cook and nobody else’s.”

That's the way it is for most writers. You may call it vanity, but they want the experience of singular authorship. Part of the encounter with literature is the encounter with a singular consciousness that has a particular take on life. It's an indispensable satisfaction.

As for the book: print technology, as I am not by any means the first to say, was itself a tremendous technological leap forward. We still haven't surpassed it. The book is in many ways a much more sophisticated thing than the computer in terms of our ability to move around in it easily, its portability, its interest as an object. There are all kinds of ways in which the book still remains at the cutting edge. I can barely read newspaper articles on a computer screen, let alone a book. Maybe it's my acculturation, but that technology has been around for a long time now, and it hasn’t come close to replacing the book.

JP: Coming to the end of a year-long stay in Rome, living and working outside your usual American context, has your view of life in America changed, and your view of your own role as an artist in America?

TW: Inevitably, when you get away from your own country, you become more alert to its oddities. When our oldest son, Michael, went off to Russia after high school, he taught English in a little grade school near the Finnish border for several months, and then he taught in a slum school in Nairobi. When he came back to Palo Alto he was just sort of gawking, he hadn't been back to the States in a year, and of course Palo Alto is quintessentially the States, in its most prosperous incarnation, and he was looking around and saying how people talk about Russia or Africa as exotic places, but that Palo Alto is the most exotic place in the world. And it is. You get a sense of the exoticism of our culture, the extraordinary oddities that it is allowed to cultivate, its prosperity, its ability to isolate itself. Yes, you become very aware of that, working away.

I couldn't live permanently out of the country, it's my medium, the water I swim in. But I've loved working abroad. We have on different occasions left the States for a year or so. We've lived in Mexico, in Germany, in Rome, and it's great to negotiate another language, but you are not really in touch with it the way you are with English, you're not getting a lot of it, you are living in a kind of a bubble of alienness. There's no way not to, unless you were raised in this country, and had complete access to the currents that are around you and know what's going on. I feel that I have that in the States (maybe I don't entirely, but I feel that I do). Over here I know I don't, and so I am in a bubble, and this is a very productive thing for one's writing. I couldn't do it forever, but it's great as a kind of respite.

JP: In a recent class that I taught in contemporary fiction, we came to *The Night in Question* after reading Don DeLillo's *White Noise*. The varied and animated reactions to both your work and to DeLillo's were quite striking. It seemed as though DeLillo strikes deep chords in our public or collective psyche, whereas your work resonates in our private selves, is far

more personal. What do you think of this characterization, and how would you place your work, and DeLillo's, in American writing today?

TW: Well, I wouldn't begin to "place" my work, because I really don't have a sense of it. I like DeLillo's work, especially that book. He's made himself a very assiduous and expert student of the details of momentary American life. He is able to mimic all kinds of languages--corporate language, technological language, the language of academia--to great and often hilarious effect. In my own work I suppose there is a kind of personal focus, and I'm almost embarrassed to admit the extent to which this is not necessarily a completely conscious choice of mine to write in this way. It's just the way I write. I guess he writes about what interests him, as I write about what interests me.

I remember reading something of John Barth's years ago in the *New York Times Book Review*, where he talked about the fact that he himself doesn't really much like fiction that's about fiction, self-reflexive, so-called postmodern fiction, that his great heroes are Scott and Dickens, and he said that's the kind of book he'd really like to write, but whenever he sits down to start writing one of those, he ends up with another novel by John Barth. So nature asserts itself, in spite of conscious intention, and I suspect something like that is going on with me. My writing does not proceed from conscious theory, or from a sense of hierarchy about which are the best kinds of fiction to write. I love Chekhov and Tolstoy, and I like Nabokov and Hemingway, I like Flannery O'Connor and Katherine Anne Porter, and I don't feel any need to make a totem pole out of our literature. I don't think it is profitably read that way.

JP: It seems to me that you expose yourself fairly regularly, programmatically to the fiction that is around you, and yet you continue to ride your own horse.

TW: Well, I hope I do. I don't know if I have any choice at this point.

JP: Sense of place in Tobias Wolff's fiction seems to involve varieties of the American landscape: the northwest, the southwest and southern California, the northeast, and even the south, for military bases at any rate, and of course America's Vietnam. How would you define sense of place in your work, compared, say, to the work of regionally "located" writers like Eudora Welty in Mississippi or John McGahern and others in Ireland?

TW: Well, those writers have had the advantage, if that is what it is, of living in the same place for a really long time, and I did not have that. I grew up a nomad, really, and lived all over the country, and that's my curse and my blessing, I guess.

JP: I came across Raymond Carver sort of answering this question, and he said most of his stories are set indoors anyway!

TW: Ha! That's a good answer, that's pure Ray. Someone pointed out to me, and I had never thought of it this way, that a lot of my stories take place in cars, or at least begin in cars. *This Boy's Life* begins in a car and ends in a car. And maybe that's my place, the car, because I was forever being moved from place to place to place, and so in a sense my place was the inside of a Nash Rambler.

JP: A number of my students had read *This Boy's Life* in another class before coming to your stories in *The Night in Question*, none of which they had read previously. In fact, in the childhood/adolescent stories ("Firelight", "Flyboys", "Powder") they kept calling the narrator "Toby". Is this chore of keeping memoir and fiction distinct perhaps an obstacle for your readers?

TW: It may be. I don't rightly know what to do about it. I mean, I'm drawn to writing about kids, I like writing about kids, because they are all potential, they are still becoming, they are not finished yet. I like watching something happen that may be one

of those things that fills in a little more of the blank. But as for the problem of reading, I understand it, but it isn't something I have much of an answer for, except that I myself need to know, when I am writing it, whether something is memoir or fiction. And I know that in a story like 'Firelight", in *The Night in Question* - the story of a boy and his mother looking at houses in Seattle when they first arrive—that there is a thread of autobiography in there, no question about it. But the events I actually describe happening in this story didn't happen, and I would never have been comfortable calling that a memoir. I would have felt dishonest. It's shaped like a story, formed like a story, in a way that the chapters of *This Boy's Life* are not. It's really an artifact of invention, a piece of fiction. I have to keep that straight. I can't pretend to myself, though, that all my readers are going to keep it straight.

Sometimes writers deliberately blur that line for their own purposes. I think Hemingway often does. Or William Maxwell, in his novel *So Long, See You Tomorrow*. If you look at the biographical information given on the back of the novel, you see that it points precisely to the information we learn about the narrator in the novel. He even at one point uses the expression, "this novel, this memoir, whatever it is, that I am writing", but he calls it a novel on the cover and it is a novel, a made-up thing. Writers frequently use this trust of the reader. Readers like to identify, like to think that the character they are reading about is actually the writer. And Maxwell is using that to draw you into this experience. As long as you identify something as fiction, I think you're off the hook, you're not asking for special treatment.

JP: *The Night in Question* begins with a faked death ("Mortals" in which a former IRS man has phoned his own obituary in to the local newspaper), and ends with an all-too-real death ("Bullet in the Brain"). I am reminded of the quotation from Victor Hugo, "We are all under sentence of death, with indefinite reprieve". The world according to Tobias Wolff, and I recall here Raymond Carver's suggestion that 'Every…writer makes the world over according to his own specifications" [*Fires*, 13], includes an acute awareness of mortality as a regular preoccupation, though without adopting a morbid tone. Do you feel this is part of your made-over world?

TW: Yes, especially in that book, hence the title, "the night in question", which is certainly a hint that mortality is at issue. That night is always in question, and how we live in relation to it. A story can serve as a kind of memento mori. *The Death of Ivan Illych* is a classic memento mori, a reminder to the reader that he is going to die and he'd better get his life straight. It's inevitable that those questions will enter into a writer's work at the point in life when he no longer has that youthful sense of immortality.

JP: Different take, maybe, on the same question. There is an on-line review of *The Night in Question* from gialloWeb that describes these stories as all turning around solitude.

TW: I suppose that's true. I think that's probably the pole around which most fiction turns. I remember a line in Wright Morris's book *The Territory Ahead*, when he is wondering why Thomas Wolfe, while extremely interesting to teenage boys, ceases to be interesting to them when they get older. He said the reason boys like Thomas Wolfe is that he writes about loneliness, which is a condition of adolescence, but not about solitude, which is the condition of man. It's a beautiful, subtle distinction. We are all more or less solitary, and we live our lives trying both to break out of it and to maintain it; it is both necessary to us and terrifying to us. There is a continual flux in our natures. It's another of the things that fiction lives by.

JP: And finally, I would like to ask you to react to this:

Tobias Wolff in interviews:
"I think that art is a redemptive activity" [*Alaska Quarterly Review* 9, 1990]
"Stories have the power…to suddenly fill us with the knowledge of other lives and with the importance of those lives to the people who lead them. And in that way, yes, I write to change people". [*Passion and Craft*, ed. Lyons and Oliver, 1998]
Rainer Maria Rilke, "Archaic Torso of Apollo":
"…for here there is no place
that does not see you. You must change your life".

Most of the stories in *The Night in Question* carry this appeal, in one sense or another. However, Raymond Carver, in a 1983 interview [*Fires*, 215-16], to the question of whether his writing will change anybody, replies that he had expected to change after experiencing works of high art, Rilke's poems among them, "but then I found out soon enough that my life was not going to change at all". He suggests instead that "[art] does not *have* to do anything. It just has to be there for the fierce pleasure we take in doing it, and the different kind of pleasure that's taken in reading something that's durable and made to last, as well as beautiful in and for itself. Something that throws off these sparks--a persistent and steady glow, however dim".

How do we heed Rilke's appeal, and yours?

TW: I think that's a really interesting question. Let's talk about Ray for a minute, what he says there. I agree with him that poems don't need to change anybody, literature doesn't need to change anybody, in order for it to have worth. As he says, the ferocious pleasure we take in it is a sufficient justification. For example, what do we demand of a piano sonata by Mozart? Do we demand that it change us after we listen to it? It isn't enough that it just be the beautiful thing that it is? However, I think art does change us, even the Mozart sonata. I think we are changed by the experience of beauty, by the experience of a profound emotion so artistically formed that it becomes an experience of the generosity of life. I think maybe the problem is in the word "change", that we generally consider to mean some kind of instantaneous revolution in character. I think a change can be an opening up, a receptiveness to life, an escape from the prison of the self for a while. That's a change.

Now, I would say that in Ray's case the change actually has to do with a revolution of character, of an almost melodramatic kind, because though he says, "I soon learned that my life wasn't going to change", that isn't true. His life did change. And it changed in large part because of his art, the art that he practiced and the art that he received. Ray was not the same person when he died as when I met him. He had changed. The beautiful stories, the generous stories he wrote, the very writing of those stories deepened him, changed him, made him larger than he had been. He was an enthusiastic reader, always giving me books that he thought I absolutely needed to read. He had very little patience with books that were tricky, or cute, or purely ironic. He was hungry for something else, for the kinds of things that could change you when you read them. And he was changed greatly. The world he grew up in was rough--I know that world, I partly grew up in it myself. How did he escape its brutalizing influence to become the kind of person he finally turned out to be? A large part of it had to do with his reading and writing, no question about it.

It was characteristically modest of him to beg off any grand claims for his writing or for literature itself. But the evidence suggests to me that the opposite is true, that his own case illustrates that it does have this power. It certainly has in my own life. I would

testify without hesitation that the experience of literature has changed me and continues to change me.

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